Alberta Children's Services

Response to the Children's Advocate Annual Report 2002/03

Alberta

Response to the Children's Advocate Annual Report 2002-2003

Alberta Children's Services was pleased to receive the 2002-2003 Children's Advocate Annual Report. The work of the Advocate is extremely important in ensuring that children and youth receiving services from the Alberta government have an independent advocate to assist them. The Ministry relies on the Advocate as a key method of ensuring that children and youth receive all the support they need to become healthy, independent, productive adults.

The issues raised in this report reflect a reality that is more than two years old. All of the issues raised in the report have been addressed through various Ministry programs, services or legislation. In particular, many of the positive changes have taken place through the development and implementation of the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act*. This act is on the leading edge in providing services to children, youth and families. As a result, many jurisdictions around the world are looking to Alberta as an example of a truly innovative approach to helping children.

The Ministry has a close working relationship with the Advocate, and continues to take steps to address issues and concerns as they arise. The following are specific steps the Ministry has taken to address issues raised in the report.

Children's Advocate Report: Ministry Responses to Systemic Issue Indicators 2002-2003 Reporting Year

Children and Youth with Complex Needs

- The *Family Support for Children with Disabilities (FSCD) Act* was developed in response to input from Albertans during the *Child Welfare Act* review in 2001-02. Parents and stakeholders indicated the unique needs of children and youth with disabilities could not be sufficiently addressed within child protection legislation. They also identified the need for improved access to information, better coordination and integration of services, increased family involvement, and more family-focused supports and services.
- The *FSCD Act* delivers a range of proactive family-centred supports and services to empower families of children with disabilities, preserve and strengthen their families, and prevent them from going into crisis or becoming involved with the child protection system unnecessarily.
- The act facilitates greater integration and coordination of services. It also recognizes the complexities that families face in navigating a large cross-sector service system. The act promotes improved access to information, referrals, service coordination and advocacy support for families. The act provides services that assist families with navigating the increasingly complex service system and getting access to the support, services and resources they need.
- The *FSCD Act* recognizes that the needs of children with disabilities and their families are most effectively met through an integrated, coordinated and multidisciplinary approach. Health professionals, service providers and other experts now work together to determine the type and level of supports and services that are most appropriate to meet a child's needs.

- A procedure is being developed to promote effective working relationships between the child intervention and family support for children with disabilities programs. This will ensure that children and youth with disabilities, who are in the care of the Director, and their caregivers, receive appropriate services and support.

Face Down Restraints

- Children's Services recognized the danger inherent with the use of face down restraints and their use was prohibited through a policy directive.
- Effective November 1, 2004, section 23 (5) of the Licensing Regulation prohibits the use of face down restraints.

Youth in Transition

Transitional Supports

- The Ministry created a Youth Strategies branch in May 2003 to meet the transitional needs of at-risk youth.
- The Advancing Futures Bursary program was created in November 2003 to provide educational support to youth who are or were in the care of the Director. Currently, there are 211 youth receiving support through this program. In 2003-2004, 16 young adults successfully graduated as a result of supports provided by the bursary program.
- Under the *Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act* and related regulations, the Ministry can provide support and financial assistance to a young adult between the ages of 18 and 22 years (previously this age was 20 years).
- Transition planning for youth must start at age 16. Policy requires the completion of a Transition to Independence Plan, which is based on the youth's dreams, goals and ambitions.
- Policy emphasizes the need for inter-ministerial collaboration and partnership with the community and other Ministries to ensure successful bridging to adulthood.

Bridging Service Systems

- The Alberta Children and Youth Initiative (ACYI) is a collaborative partnership of government ministries working together on issues affecting children and youth. The Youth Strategies branch participates on this initiative on behalf of the Ministry to ensure that the transitional supports for youth requiring adult services are met.
- The *Policy Framework for Children and Youth with Special and Complex Needs and their Families* was approved by government in July 2003 and articulates how departments will work together to provide services for children and youth with special and complex needs.
- The Policy Framework formalizes an integrated case management model for children and youth with complex needs, including regional integrated case management teams that conduct early identification, assessment, planning and service delivery, and monitoring and evaluation.

- Implementation of the Policy Framework began in the fall of 2003. Orientation sessions were provided in nine regions across the province. In 2003-04, regions began formalizing their regional integrated case management teams to review services for children and youth with complex needs. Each region received $70,000 for funding of a regional support coordinator.
- In 2004-05, implementation of the Policy Framework continued, including:
  - Securing $3.5 million to enhance services for children and youth with complex needs. The funding helped create a regional integrated case management system to better coordinate the diverse range of programs and services required by these children and youth. Funding for operation and service delivery has been allocated to all regions.
  - The launch of a toll-free Child Disability Resource Link in August 2004 (1-866-346-4661). This line gives callers information on a wide range of provincial and community services and supports.
- The Alberta Response Model helps bridge service gaps by supporting a number of work teams. Among these are a regional support team for Child and Family Services Authorities, a differential response work team to articulate work processes for family enhancement and child protection case management, and an outcomes team that is working with Early Childhood Development and National Outcome Measures to help foster child-centred outcomes evaluation and quality assurance.

School Completion

- The Alberta Response Model (ARM) is evaluated on ten National Outcome Indicators. One of the first year measures for the Response Model is the grade level and graduation rate for the province's children and youth. The Response Model aims to improve the grade level and graduate rate for the province's children and youth by providing the tools needed to produce better outcomes for children and youth that are fiscally sustainable.
- The *Advancing Futures* Bursary Program was created to help provide educational supports for youth who are or were in the care of the Director. By providing for the financial needs of these youth and therefore helping them avoid incurring debt through student finance, these youth are better equipped to complete some form of post-secondary education successfully.

Permanency Planning

- On February 10, 2003, the Ministry launched an adoption website to increase the number of adoptions of children and youth in permanent government care, to recruit adoptive homes for special needs children and to raise awareness of the adoption program in Alberta. In the website's first year, the number of adoptions increased by 30 per cent.
- The *Enhancement Act* emphasizes and reinforces that permanency for children is a priority through: collaborative decision making and early resolution of issues; shortened timeframes for children in temporary care; concurrent planning (which requires a reunification plan as well as an alternative permanency plan for a child should reunification not be possible in a timely manner); and, increased financial and other support for those who adopt or take on private guardianship of a child in the permanent care of the director.

- For children who may not otherwise find an adoptive home, such as youth in care, the option of a permanent foster home may be considered.
- The Alberta Response Model (ARM) was named a top priority in the 2002-2005 Ministry business plan. ARM has brought with it significant changes in the areas of service delivery and program supports, including a differential response case management model, increased permanency planning with a more focused approach to ensure the needs of Alberta's youth are met as they move to the adult system(s), as well as the creation of an adoption website.

First Nations Youth and Permanency Planning

- The Ministry acknowledges that the adoption of First Nations children and youth is a sensitive and emotional issue for many First Nations people.
- Within Alberta, a number of regional initiatives have been successful at finding permanent homes for First Nations children and youth. The Ministry continues to work closely with the Yellowhead Tribal Services Agency Custom Adoption program, the Bigstone Cree Permanency Planning Project and the Calgary Elder Project to find permanent homes for Aboriginal children and youth.
- The *Enhancement Act* clarifies and strengthens the involvement of Aboriginal communities in planning for their children and youth. It has introduced the role of a Designate, who is appointed by Chief and Counsel, to act as a contact for the Band and facilitate case planning for children and youth.